

## Opinion

## An Endangered Species?

*Skills Training, Distance Learning and the Devolution of Student Development*

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The nature of the college experience, from a total student development perspective, is valued less and is possibly threatened more today than at any point in the evolution of higher education. Two-year colleges, as opportunity institutions that carry the expectation of being especially responsive to changes around them, may be more vulnerable than other types of postsecondary institutions.

Many conditions have contributed to this erosion of student development. A rather narrow definition of economic development, fueled primarily by an overreaction to Workforce 2000 figures that play down the need for a college-educated employee, is perhaps the most significant contributor to this weakened position. Another factor -- possibly equally



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important -- is the competition of higher education for the declining student population. This has encouraged too many of us to try to be all things to all people at any location on almost a 24-hour basis.

Efforts to deal with these two factors have encouraged us to embrace a job-entry, skills-driven "training" approach and to abandon the concepts of an "educated" person, a concept that has served the nation so well in the past. The enamored relationships, and the almost religious fervor, with which some are embracing the distance learning and related educational media/technology developments have the potential for serving as the final nail in higher education's coffin, from a total student development perspective.

The position taken is not that higher education should not be sensitive to economic conditions, nor that institutions should not be responsive to the changing demographics of the student population. Nor does this position say we should not take advantage of the changes in technology -- administratively and instructionally. Rather, the proposition advanced is that higher education's responses to changes should be controlled and coordinated, based upon philosophical principles, instructional delivery concepts, and student development understandings that have contributed to the development of colleges as educational institutions in the broadest definition of that modifier.

In many settings, economic development is understood almost totally to consist of industrial/new business recruitment supported by a "quick-start" training program for the production line employees. As such industries are increasingly high-tech and will be

impacted by the ever-changing technology, will their employees not need to be broadly educated, free-thinking, self-directional problem-solvers who can work successfully as a member of a work group in a total quality management environment?

Does that possibility not raise the question of the need for an "educated" versus a "trained" workforce for 2000 and beyond? Is not that type of educated person the product of a comprehensive educational experience in a college setting that moves beyond the "PCP" curriculum -- Parking Lot-Classroom-Parking Lot? This challenge is particularly confronted by commuter, two-year colleges such as ours, which increasingly are dealing with a non-June high school graduate student population.

How can we get to that type of student with curriculum planners who are looking for the minimum exposure for career-oriented degrees in the general education and related academic components of the programs?

In passing, it should be noted that the concept of applied academic courses, a part of the promising Tech Prep movement in secondary schools, may hold some curriculum planning promise for us in higher education, with respect to the integrated nature of the college experience.

In our haste to meet the needs of the non-traditional, employed student, higher education may have become too responsive. Extended Day, Evening Divisions, Weekend College, Shopping Center College Fronts, Off-campus Centers, Experiential Learning, etc., -- the list could go on endlessly -- are examples of noble efforts that are being made to meet the non-traditional student more than half way. Such efforts must be tempered with the importance of student exposure to individuals other than the classroom instructors; the value of group process and group projects

as preparation for success in an increasingly group-oriented employment environment; the need to be able to fit the importance of earning a living into the larger context of living a life from the perspective of effective family membership and community citizenship and the appropriate use of leisure time; and, finally, the development of media and information processing skills that will support a lifetime of inquiry and learning.

As an administrator who has embraced most of the delivery strategies cited in the previous paragraph, I remain challenged by the realization that we must work especially hard to educate our student fully in such programs. Efforts such as those discussed have been the forerunners of "distance learning technology" which increasingly is being viewed as the breakthrough that will allow us to put every student on the "end of the technological log with the modern day Socrates from a far-off place." While not deflecting the challenge of and the possibilities offered by the media revolution, I for one am frightened by the implications of its misuse.

Such a frightening possibility again is more real for opportunity institutions such as the two-year college. These colleges must deal every day with the marginally prepared students who lack the self-confidence as learners to effectively utilize the promise of technology. Unless carefully coordinated and married with supporting curriculum development efforts and staff development initiatives to ensure its effective use, we face the potential of a waste of millions of dollars of equipment funding that is becoming widely available across the country. We must not repeat the errors of the "audio-visual revolution" of the late '60s.

These words have been penned while "iced-

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in" in Northeast Georgia in early 1994. For some time I have had these three trends or concepts -- a narrow definition of economic development and the impact of a too-narrow Workforce 2000 emphasis; competition among ourselves for students -- particularly the developing group of nontraditional students; and the instructional technology/distance learning phenomena -- moving around in my mind.

With this forced day for reflection, I have tried to capture that "confusion" on paper and share it with my colleagues in the hope that it might raise productive questions for our consideration. Reflections of this type, hopefully, will help us preserve the best of the educational experience for our students as we try to deal with the realities of change around us -- a challenge that is even more demanding for those of us in the two-year, opportunity institutions.

During the Christmas break, I spent some time with a timely report from the Wingspread Group titled "An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education." The report came across my desk through our membership in the American Council on Education. I recommend the report for your review. It grapples with the mosaic of issues confronting higher education in an effective manner with strands of this discussion embedded within it.